

**Sunday 5th March, 2017 @ BFI Southbank**  
**Kelly Reichardt symposium: *River of Grass* talk by Manish Agarwal**

I'm going to talk about Cozy, the narrator of Kelly Reichardt's debut feature *River of Grass*. This film premiered at Sundance in 1994, 12 years before *Old Joy*, and is very much the work of someone still finding their voice as a writer and director. Marketed with the poster tagline 'A Girl, A Gun And Nowhere To Go', *River of Grass* plays like a deliberately localised, myth-busting, anti-*Bonnie and Clyde*. Reichardt has described it as: "A road movie without the road, a love story without the love, and a crime story without the crime."

This subversion of genre expectations and the film's basic thematic blueprint – somebody is trying to leave somewhere, without much luck – are ideas that she's repeatedly returned to and refined, but *River of Grass* doesn't have the dramatic composure or immersive, unhurried resonance of her five other features. Instead it's jumpy and comedic, spliced together in a way which, as Reichardt notes with amusement on her DVD commentary, owes an obvious stylistic debt to the French New Wave.

What the picture does have is Cozy, portrayed with perfect understatement and empathy by Lisa Bowman. Bowman was working as a waitress and was hired at the last minute after the professional actor who'd been cast in the role dropped out. Her character tells us about herself through a recurring voiceover.

Cozy's 32 years old and has grown up in that forgotten part of South Florida which tourists don't visit – Broward County and Dade County, where Reichardt herself is from – between Miami and the Everglades. The latter are referred to as the "River of Grass" by Native Americans, but our protagonist seems out of sync with this natural environment, impassively observing: "I stood near the water thinking about different things and sometimes catching a glimpse of my life, as if I was thumbing through an old photo album."

Named after his favourite musician, Cozy was raised by her father from the age of 10 after her mother left town. He's a crime scene detective – just like the director's dad in real life – and used to be a jazz drummer, two vocations steeped in classic movie lore. Cozy is herself married to a hard-working guy called Bobby whom we see just briefly in the introductory montage. Bobby has loved Cozy since high school and she figured she'd eventually start to reciprocate, but still appears to be waiting for her feelings to kick in.

They've now got two children. Cozy pours Coca-Cola into the younger one's baby bottle and calmly states how the mother-child bond has just never happened for her. She daydreams about a nice couple in a station wagon dropping by someday to claim the kids.

Cozy is so underwhelmed by existence that she admits to once calculating how many hours she's been alive, then estimating how many more are left to go. Bowman's performance draws you into this boredom, her watchful demeanor contrasting with a chatty, eccentric array of small-town supporting players who feel like they could be populating an especially quirky Jim Jarmusch production. Her character is an ideal audience surrogate if you're somebody who spends a lot of time at the cinema, both in thrall to quixotic screen narratives but also cognizant of their clichés.

Cozy goes on the run with a gun-toting stranger named Lee, played by long-term Reichardt collaborator Larry Fessenden, whom she meets in a bar after he nearly runs her over. The pair believe that they've accidentally shot dead a man whose backyard they broke into for a drunken late-night swim. Simultaneously horrified and yearning for

excitement, Cozy's narration gestures towards outlaws-on-the-lam romance: "Lee and I had crossed that straight line that Dad called the law, and I could feel the butterflies in my stomach as I tumbled deeper into a life of crime..."

However, the reality of this picture is more *Sadlands* than *Badlands*. The viewer quickly learns that the pool owner wasn't even hit, let alone killed. What's more, Lee is no bad boy antihero but rather a 29-year-old layabout dwelling in his grandmother's basement, whose half-baked criminality involves several failed attempts to sell off the family record collection.

Cozy's too self-aware to fall for Lee – they never kiss, his most charming trait being the ability to pass joints with his feet – and her musical upbringing means she'd rather listen to the vinyl than steal it. Holed up in a motel, she frequently snoozes through his navel-gazing anecdotes. Her primary concern is not having a toothbrush.

It's only after belatedly learning that she's not a wanted criminal – that real life isn't a movie plot – that Cozy cuts loose, abruptly switching from the passenger seat of Lee's car to being its sole driver. The closing sequence finds her on the highway, stuck in traffic but slowly pulling away from a landscape that has grown all too familiar.

With hindsight this could serve as a visual metaphor for where Reichardt's filmmaking was ultimately headed, towards the wide open spaces on the opposite side of America. Her subsequent stories would be more tonally assured and inhabited by people of action: the type of person that Cozy may finally become, but then every journey has to start somewhere.

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